

BOOK REVIEW

Politics and the Street in Democratic Athens. By ALEX GOTTESMAN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii + 247. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-1-107-04168-4.

The focal points of Gottesman's volume are the extra-institutional public spheres in Classical Athens—real spaces conceptually separate from formal governmental institutions but nonetheless marked by “political interaction across a wide spectrum of statuses and classes” (x), and encapsulated by the appellation “the street”; and more broadly the reciprocal interplay between “the street” and the formal sphere of Athenian public institutions, principally Council, Assembly, and courts. Thus is suggested a reading of fifth and fourth century Athenian politics broader than Mogens Hansen's focus on formal institutions or Josh Ober's on elite and mass (6-8), though Ober's citizen mass would certainly be found on Gottesman's “streets”, along with women, metics, and slaves, whom Gottesman advances as possessing meaningful voices in the city's multi-layered discourse.¹ Throughout, the writing is lucid and the argumentation very richly grounded in theory; a variety of types of ancient evidence is examined; the perspectives taken on particular issues consistently are provocative; and the bibliography is substantial and well chosen. That said, the promise of the project is not altogether realized.

The “Introduction” fairly establishes several Athenian public spheres, complexly layered, where the informal and extra-institutional overlapped and intersected with formal political institutions (20). The Agora in Chapter 1 is demonstrated an area of the city that instantiated the multi-layering, the market and its surround permeable, the spaces of government, commerce, industry, and residence busily crisscrossed by the full social spectrum. Chapter 2 examines more fully the phenomenon of “free spaces”, arenas of shared human experience where status boundaries were not always rigorously enforced, as Gottesman offers examples of Athenian social networks, both citizen and mixed status, the latter advanced

¹ See, e.g., Mogens Hansen, “On the Importance of Institutions in an Analysis of Athenian Democracy,” *C&M* 40 (1989) 107-113, and Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

more suggestively than persuasively as a type of “free space”.² While distinct from formal governmental institutions, the social networks nonetheless helped serve as their enforcement mechanism, radiating arteries along which the information of official decisions was variously circulated, interpreted, and reacted to; with the reactions at times reciprocally influencing subsequent institutional decisions. As a tool for analyzing both the dynamic and the nuance of politics in Athens, the model is innovative and conceptually attractive. But, unfortunately, the concluding examples chosen to illustrate its workings only nibble at the edges, focusing in two instances on the inability of formal institutions to transcend the street-nurtured infamy of a couple of largely secondary political figures, and the third a dupe of conformity in Aristophanes, naively obeying to its letter a preposterous decree of the Assembly (69–76).³

The broad premise of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 is that neither the formal nor extra-institutional spheres, nor the interchange between them, were immune from manipulation. In Chapter 3, Gottesman first explores the threat of informal institutional communication, notably rumor and street gossip, to “the efficacy of institutional procedure” as the sole mechanism in “the production of social knowledge” (79). The discussion eventually settles around the ritual of supplication, characterized as theatrical and emotional in appeal, and so theorized to be subversive of rational political deliberation (86–99). In its conclusion the case that gossip and rumor posed risks to the authority of institutions is incontestable. But it is by no means certain that supplication, with its clearly sequenced rules of the game, was widely regarded as irrational or institutionally inimical. As Gould has shown, from the time of Homer supplication (*hiketeia*) was a ritualized religious institution

²“Free spaces” and the role of non-citizens in shaping Athenian public discourse are issues central to Gottesman’s larger argument (for which he makes clear his debt to a series of articles by Kostas Vlassopoulos). That women, metics and slaves can be observed in a number of mixed associations and were a presence in informal contexts such as shops (49-63) is certainly of note, but we are provided little analysis of what their presence may have meant. Otherwise, metics are largely missing from the volume, slaves are examined closely in a non-political context (Chapter 6), and women when they become a focus are more often fictive than real (89-92, 193-97).

³Andocides is the better known of the two political figures largely because of his involvement in the mutilation of the Herms and the affair of the Mysteries. Despite having been provided immunity by the Assembly for his testimony, his reputation on the street remained so sullied that subsequently a decree was introduced barring him access to the Agora and all sacred places. He consequently left Athens. Aeschines gained conviction over Timarchus, a political ally of Demosthenes, largely based on the street gossip that he was a prostitute. The dupe appears in Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazousai* 758–770.

serving *inter alia* the important social role of allowing admission to those variously judged outside the social group to membership within it, in this not unlike *xenia*. And as Bers has argued (cf. 94–97), in the real instances we have of forensic supplication from the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the appeals are better seen as calculated rhetorical expressions than emotional outbursts, an observation confirmed by their standardized location within the speeches.⁴ And so the formal institutionalization of supplication as an item on the agenda of the Assembly in the later fourth century (Chapter 4), where suppliants were exclusively non-citizens, while likely providing the elite sponsors important symbolic profit (so 106–113), seems equally a confirmation of the established rhetorical character of the gesture itself.

As for manipulation, the “publicity stunts” of Chapter 5, “staged displays designed to influence Athenian public sentiment”, are examined on the basis of the “buzz” they created, their effectiveness in framing issues, and the results achieved (116–118). While the narratives of the three examples explored in detail certainly illustrate aspects of these specifics, the cogency of the larger point about what was surely a type of political event in Athens is weakened by the fact that the historicity of each of the stunts examined is questionable.⁵

In Chapter 6, “Slaves in the Theseion”, the view is of stunts from the social bottom, namely, slaves in asylum at the Theseion angling to sell themselves to new masters. The phenomenon, however, is acknowledged not really to “rise to the

⁴ John Gould, “Hiketeia,” *JHS* 93 (1973) 74–103, esp. 82–85. Victor Bers, *Genos Dikanikon: Amateur and Professional Speech in the Courtrooms of Classical Athens*. Hellenic Studies 33 (Washington D.C. and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) esp. 77–98, is much indebted on this point to David Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

⁵ Gottesman acknowledges difficulties with the three stories, but the narratives illustrate his thesis (so, e.g., 135). The first, the story of Peisistratus and the woman Phye dressed as Athena, is treated with incredulity by Herodotus (1.60.3), and skeptically by *Ath. Pol.* 14.4. There is real difficulty with the story (noted in *Ath. Pol.* 25.3–4) linking in a strange way Themistocles and Ephialtes against the Areopagus in 462/1 BCE, not least because Themistocles had been in exile for some years, perhaps by as early as 471 BCE; so Diod. 11.54–59. And the version of the story about the trial of the generals after Arginusae, told by Xenophon *Hell.* 1.7.8–9, in which Thermanes is alleged to have incited sentiment against the six generals by arranging for a number of celebrants attending the Apaturia, who were dressed in black with their heads shaved, to then attend the Assembly meeting pretending to be relatives in mourning for those lost, is unconfirmed by any other source, and is later contradicted by Xenophon himself (*Hell.* 1.7.35).

level of political action”, only to suggest a measure of agency from an unexpected source (155). “The Magnesian Street”, Chapter 7, argues how Magnesia, the model city of Plato’s *Laws*, reflects the philosopher’s late positive reflections about aspects of the Athenian “street”, as Plato allows informal speech, viz. gossip, to “supplement the work of the institutions” (213), a tolerance not admitted in the *Republic*. There is a brief summary *Conclusion*.

The subject Gottesman tackles is important and the model of political discourse he explores is inviting. The book brims with provocative arguments, though the evidence adduced in their support is not consistently compelling. For students of Greek and especially Athenian history, however, the particular merit of the volume is the nuanced case Gottesman frames for a vigorous extra-institutional public sphere in the fifth and fourth centuries. In engaging this sphere of “free spaces”—Gottesman’s “street”—the scholarly challenge going forward will be to elucidate the social composition, the galvanizing interests, and the roles played by informal extra-institutional associations within the larger dynamic of Athenian politics.

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